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## Review of Exhibits in Archives and Special Collections Libraries

Russ Taylor

Brigham Young University, [russ\\_taylor@byu.edu](mailto:russ_taylor@byu.edu)

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## Review of *Exhibits in Archives and Special Collections Libraries*

By Jessica Lacher-Feldman. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2013. 200pp. Softcover. \$69.95. ISBN 978-1-931666-64-0

Jessica Lacher-Feldman's excellent book on exhibits was sitting on my desk waiting for me to write this review when I received this email from a library colleague:

For a long time I've had a post-it to myself about finding an exhibit tutorial for library exhibit curators, mostly targeting [inexperienced] non-special collections folks who may do exhibits ... but it would be helpful to new or disorganized curators in special collections as well.

The thing that I'm looking for doesn't seem to exist.... It seems that a guide to creating library exhibits including timelines (how far ahead to do what, etc.) would make a great library or archival publication.

Indeed. I was happy (almost smug) to report to her that the publication she was looking for did exist. It was sitting on my desk! She was pleased to learn this, as will be other archivists and librarians as well.

There is nothing more daunting to a novice (or even veteran) curator than to be faced with the task of mounting an exhibit of materials from an extensive collection of books, photographs, or manuscripts. What to use? How to show it? How much to say? What to leave out? These are all valid questions, and great advice can be had in Ms. Lacher-Feldman's book. Last year, Jessica was named head of Special Collections at LSU's Hill Memorial Library. Prior to that, she was Curator of Rare Books & Special Collections and Public & Outreach Services Coordinator at The University of Alabama's W.S. Hoole Special Collections Library. In addition, Ms. Lacher-Feldman also teaches one-day workshops on exhibits for the Society of American Archivists. She knows whereof she speaks. Her guide to exhibits, then, has evolved from hours of research, writing, lecturing, and practical experience in showcasing archival and rare book collections.

The introduction's explication of why we as archivists and librarians do exhibits justifies our commitment in spending time in this important effort:

1. ... archivists have many of the same qualities as historians.... Exhibit development in archives and special collections allows us to apply historical research methods to collections, to interpret and analyze

information and artifacts, and to describe how collections intersect and complement one another.

2. ... exhibition work allows for the designers in us to find satisfying and creative outlets.
3. ... exhibition work allows the writer and editor in us to express ideas and share knowledge with diverse audiences.
4. ... exhibition work allows for the opportunity to teach and impart the wonder and excitement of our craft to students, colleagues, and visitors.

If you've ever tried to formulate a reason for why we do what we do, there's probably no better thinking than this.

But don't look to this book for a primer on the principles of graphic design (Jessica will refer you to some excellent sources for this, however). Do look to it for informative discussions of exhibition philosophy and theory; planning and step-by-step processes for mounting an exhibit; developing innovative exhibit ideas; establishing exhibit policies, procedures, and practices; and the fundamentals of laying out an exhibit. Some of my favorite chapters of the book deal with what happens after the exhibit opens. I found the information on creating a virtual exhibit based on the "real" one, promoting your exhibit to the media and to your various communities, and using the exhibit in outreach and education to be particularly valuable. Several chapters also cover how one evaluates the quality of an exhibit, including the use of American Alliance of Museums' standards and other assessment tools.

As an example of the sort of information one will find in this book is the chapter on "Labels, Design, and Layout" (Chapter 6). Certainly an entire book could be written on this topic, but within the space of fifteen pages is presented an easily understood guide for creating labels that are instructive, but not overly wordy. The photographic examples of case layout, however, are—in my view—generally too cluttered. I favor a simple case arrangement, and many of the photos in this chapter show displays bulging with photographs, documents, books, and artifacts.

This volume concludes with case studies written by three archivists that give the reader an opportunity to see real examples of behind-the-scenes work that goes into the planning and mounting of exhibitions. Also included are six informative appendices with sample forms, equipment lists, instructions on making a simple book support, pointers for creating labels and laying out cases, and all-important listings of relevant literature and sources for exhibit supplies.

Lone arrangers will appreciate the helpful advice, discussions, and resource and idea lists in this work. Larger institutions with exhibit designers on staff will perhaps not find a great deal new here. What everyone can benefit from, however, is the helpful discussion of how exhibits come to be (the creative steps and processes) and the formulation of the message to viewers. In my own experience, when too little

thought is given to these fundamental questions of exhibit creation in the planning process, the completed exhibit will lack a unifying focus. Even veterans need to be reminded of this from time to time.

Ms. Lacher-Feldman has a charge for each of us involved in exhibit creation: "Proceed and Be Bold!" Her hope is that this book "gives ideas, energy, and permission to strike out in new directions when working with exhibits." Given this advice, *Exhibits in Archives and Special Collections Libraries* probably has something for all.

Russ Taylor  
*Supervisor of Reference Services and  
Department Chair  
Perry Special Collections  
Brigham Young University  
Provo, Utah*